

Carnahan co-founds new caucus

Buck Collier, South City Journal

To the legislative panels representing specific groups throughout the U.S., add the latest one featuring a distinctly St. Louis flavor.

The Congressional Bosnian Caucus has been formed, the brainchild of U.S. Reps. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, and Chris Smith, a New Jersey Democrat.

Carnahan's 3rd District is home to the largest gathering of Bosnians outside of Bosnia, which was wracked by a civil war a decade ago that scattered refugees to several U.S. cities, as well as cities in Europe.

The Bosnians initially settled in South St. Louis City; in recent years more and more Bosnians have been leaving the city to take up residence in South and Southwest St. Louis County. Several have ventured into Jefferson County, as well.

It's unclear exactly how many Bosnians are in Metro St. Louis. The population in recent years has been estimated as high as 40,000, but officials of the International Institute of Saint Louis, a refugee and immigrant resettlement agency, and some within the Bosnian community have noted that an undetermined number of Bosnians who settled in other U.S. cities have relocated to St. Louis. Among the Bosnians who came to the U.S., St. Louis has become known as particularly supportive of Bosnians in terms of business opportunities.

Carnahan was unavailable for comment about the founding of the Bosnian Caucus, but spokesman Shannon O'Brien told the Suburban Journals that the caucus was formed as part of the congressman's effort to provide good constituent services.

"He just wanted to represent the growing Bosnian community in his district," said O'Brien, Carnahan's deputy director of communications.

In addition to being a voice in Congress for the Bosnians in St. Louis and elsewhere in the U.S., the caucus will work toward better relations between the U.S. and Bosnia. However, O'Brien said Carnahan has "nothing specific in mind at this point involving relations between the U.S. and Bosnia."

Just how large the caucus might become is unclear, O'Brien said. At last word, the caucus included only Carnahan and Smith. "It's just now getting started," O'Brien said, adding that an effort will be made to find other federal legislators to sign on.

The move also raises the issue of other similar caucuses with a St. Louis connection being formed. Carnahan's district includes South St. Louis City and South County, both of which are home to substantial numbers of other immigrant and refugee populations from around the world. Aside from the Bosnians, the next-largest group appears to be the estimated 10,000 Vietnamese who live in South City.

In the past few years, the area has seen an increase in the number of refugees and immigrants from Middle Eastern and African countries.

O'Brien said it's unclear if other caucuses would be created for specific ethnic groups. "I'm sure he's looking into ways to better represent all his constituents," she told the Journals.

News of the creation of the Congressional Bosnian Caucus was met warmly by a key figure in a local group that works with the Bosnians. The Rev. Tom Wyrsh, chairman of the Southside Bosnian Services Collaborative, said he is pleased to hear of the caucus and is anxious to see what it does to foster relations between the U.S. and the Balkan nation that was part of the former Yugoslavia.

Wyrsh is the pastor of St. Margaret of Scotland Catholic Church, 39th and Flad; the church serves as the site of the Collaborative, which is a collection of government, private and non-profit organizations that provide a variety of services to the region's Bosnians and other newcomers.

The Collaborative, which is scheduled to meet Tuesday morning, has been involved in an effort to bring the Bosnian ambassador to the U.S. to St. Louis for an up-close tour of South St. Louis City and the Bosnian neighborhoods.

But while Carnahan and others laud the presence of the Bosnians, other area residents - many of them descendents of earlier refugees who settled here - are critical of the attention being paid to the Bosnians.

Much of the resentment is coming from longtime residents of Affton in South St. Louis County; Affton is feeling the effect of the recent influx of the Bosnians, as well as the arrival of a growing number of other foreign-born residents. The Affton School District in particular is feeling the effect: More than 20 separate primary languages are spoken by the district's students.

Programs have been set up - including one spearheaded by the University of Missouri-St. Louis that involves the Affton School District - to help assimilate the new Bosnian residents into the community. While those programs are hailed by some, they are derided by others.

Says Gerry Arb of Affton: "I read the article recently in the (South Suburban Journals) about the new program to assist our ever growing population of Bosnians and other immigrants into our community. My great-grandparents were also immigrants who came from Europe; however, when they arrived they were not given anything."

That criticism - that Bosnians are receiving economic assistance other newcomers from generations ago did not - is a common one heard directed especially toward the Bosnians.

But, according to Carnahan staffer Erica Turner, residents such as Arb probably aren't distinguishing between refugees and immigrants. Turner handles constituent services issues in Carnahan's district office in South County.

"Refugees are treated differently," she told the Journals, noting that certain benefits are available to refugees - for a limited time - that aren't necessarily available to immigrants. The difference is that a refugee has been displaced from their home country because of war,

drought or other disaster while an immigrant has left his country by choice.

But for those who feel the way Arb does, that might be a difference without a distinction. "Soon with more and more influx of immigrants into Affton and the continuing advertisements in papers that this is the place for them to move, the more the American residents will move out of the area," Arb said in his letter to the Journals. "I live in an area just perfect for these new residents and believe me when it is time to sell my home (which will be soon) my real estate agent will be Bosnian, just like everyone else in Affton in the future," he said.

© Copyright 2007